DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 316 CG 018 896

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TITLE Boosting Teachers' Self-Esteem: A Dropout Prevention Strategy.
PUB DATE [Mar 86]
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the International Collaborative Conference on Careers (Miami, FL, March 26-28, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitude Change; *Dropout Prevention; Elementary Secondary Education; *Negative Attitudes; Professional Continuing Education; *Self Esteem; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teacher Workshops

ABSTRACT

Good teachers leave teaching not because pay is low but because of poor working conditions and too little recognition. Since students can be strongly affected by teachers, teachers who feel negatively about themselves can adversely affect students. A five-evening workshop was developed in Dade County, Florida to boost teachers' self-esteem and to have the praticipants experience trust, prizing, realness, understanding, and freedom so that they could replicate this environment for their students. Group exercises included an introduction to group rules, non-verbal communication, introducing your partner, giving yourself a positive adjective, balloon experience, value auction, choosing three values, admiration ladder, and identifying negative/positive communication. Teachers implemented the self-esteem boosting exercises in the classroom with reported success. Teachers reported that students enjoyed a more relaxed atmosphere and teachers themselves reported greater sensitivity to students' differences. Teachers' scores on a before-and-after self-esteem questionnaire improved following the workshop sessions. (ABL)

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BOOSTING TEACHERS' SELF-ESTEEM: A DROPOUT PREVENTION STRATEGY

by

Ann Moliver Ruben, Ph. D.

Creating a school environment in which excellent teachers stay in teaching and students stay in school through graduation is the goal of all school systems. According to Dr. Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, good teachers leave teaching not because the pay is poor but because of poor working conditions and too little recognition. Students drop out of school for many reasons but mostly because they have experienced failure. Teachers and students both leave school in an effort to salvage their own diminished self-esteem. "Nobody seems to care" is a common complaint that they both share.

Most of us have long been aware of the the important roles that teachers play in the lives of their students. Dr. Boyer is convinced if we were to "ask any American to name a person who was an important influence in his or her life, and more often than not, a teacher will be cited." If this premise is valid, it is safe to assume that teachers who feel negatively about themselves because of lack of recognition from parents, supervisors

and principals can adversely affect the lives of students.

It might take some stretch of the imagination to make the link between preventing dropouts by improving students' self-esteem by improving teachers' self-esteem but the process deserves a closer look. One teacher said it all with these words: "Sure children need self-esteem boosting activities to bring out positive feelings about themselves but I couldn't do it for them until someone did it for me." Previous work with teachers validated that when teachers were shown the appreciation and recognition they deserved, they enjoyed teaching more and created a classroom environment that was esteem-enhancing for their students (Ruben, 1975). Studies have shown that children with superior intelligence but low self-esteem may do poorly in school, while children of average intelligence but high self-esteem can be unusually successful (Nelson, 1983). Students who experience success in school rarely desire to leave before graduation.

This paper will describe the process used to effectively boost teachers' self-esteem in Dade County Public Schools, the fifth largest in this nation. Eighteen teachers, counselors and education specialists voluntarily met for five evenings, once a week for three hours at a local state university for a workshop entitled "The Importance of Boosting Teachers' Self-Esteem." They received 15 master point credits through the Dade-Monroe Teacher Education Center (TEC) applicable for teacher recertification for attending. The funds for the workshop came from the Florida State Department of Education through its Teacher Education Center Act, Chapter 85-238, designed to

stimulate collaborative efforts between school systems and universities "to enhance continuing education of instructional personnel." The workshop was designed to have the participants experience a climate of trust, prizing, realness, understanding and freedom so that they would appreciate its value and be comfortable recreating a similar classroom climate for their students. In all, over 20 groups exercises most of which appear in the book Our Teachers Are Crying: A Positive Approach to Solving Classroom Problems were used to achieve the desired results. At the very beginning teachers were encouraged to ask for a "standing ovation" at any time for no reason at all except that they wanted one. This delightful experience set the tone for fun, sharing and caring about each other. Other activities included:

*An introduction to group rules to set up trust

*Non-verbal communication exercise

*Introducing your partner to the group

*Giving yourself a positive adjective

*Balloon experience

*Value auction

*Choosing three values

*Dividing yourselves into family birth-order groups

*Walter Fish (story)

*I'm Okay: You're Okay

*How I Grew Up to be a Happy Child (story)

*Three case histories

*Volunteering for an unknown experiment

*Dot experience

*Self-Esteem Inventory (1st and last sessions)

*I Remember When (story)

*Admiration Ladder

*Identifying Negative/Positive Communication

It became clear that as the participants were nurtured, appreciated and valued as individuals by participating in the variety of groups experiences, they were able to become more nurturing, appreciating and valuing with their students. They enjoyed the ease and success with which they were able to replicate many of the self-esteem boosting exercises with their students who ranged from kindergarten to high school. They were free to reject any exercise they felt wouldn't work for their students and were encouraged to adapt any of the exercises to suit their classes.

Among the four specific objectives of the workshop, teachers were asked to describe in writing five activities that were implemented with students in the classroom and its effect on the students. They revealed that by introducing their students to the variety of exercises (most of them used more than five) their students felt closer to them as human beings and both were enjoying a more relaxed atmosphere in their classroom. They also reported that they had

acquired greater sensitivity regarding students' individual differences and were more accepting of those differences.

As an added bonus, the teachers learned that all their scores on a 29-item self-esteem questionnaire had significantly improved in a positive direction ($t = 3.8$ significant at .005) when before-the workshop scores were compared with after-the-workshop scores. Intuitively, they knew they had changed but the improved inventory scores confirmed it.

Few educators would quibble with the philosophy that when teachers create a classroom environment in which students' self-esteem is enhanced that students will enjoy learning, look forward to going to school and not consider dropping out of school. But first it is important to take good care of the teacher/caretaker. Teachers can and do affect the lives of students positively and negatively. Recognizing the power they have over the lives of students often comes as a shock to them. One teacher echoed the sentiments of many at the end of the workshop with these words: "I never realized the vast amount of influence I have over my students. One word can make them or break them. It is sometimes frightening what power I have over them. At the same time, it is wonderful to know that I can make a positive difference in their lives."

Dr. Boyer concurs. "It may have been a third-grade teacher who made a floundering child feel special, a high school teacher who made rigorous demands or a college professor who ignited a lasting spark of curiosity." Few will disagree that teachers with high

self-esteem are healthy role models for their students and can positively influence their students to strive for higher goals. But it becomes clearer that this process cannot be left strictly to chance. If we are serious about wanting to prevent students from dropping out of school, a concerted effort must be made to improve teachers' self-esteem. Here is one educational experience in which the results indicate that both teachers, students and our society as a whole, come out ahead.

Many thanks to Olivia Bevilacqua, a 6th grade teacher, and Sandra Scott, an elementary school counselor, for participating in the presentation of this paper at An International Collaborative Conference on Careers, 1986, Miami, Florida.

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